**Amitav Ghosh´s Sea of Poppies- A Multicultural and Multilingual Narrative**

Pop Titus[[1]](#footnote-2)

**Abstract**: Amitav Gosh´s novel *Sea of Poppies* is the first part of his *Ibis* trilogy, a saga set just before the Opium Wars. Its interfigural characters, people of all races and languages perambulate the stories, spicing the narrative with an abundance of words and terms from East-Asian, Pacific and *pidgin* languages that turn the trilogy into a unique cocktail of multicultural and multilingual *ecriture*. In this paper, I am intent on highlighting this cultural and linguistic diversity and demonstrate how Ghosh manages to create a cultural and linguistic *hybrid space*.

**Keywords**: multilingual, multicultural, hybridity, pidgin

In this paper, I am intent on presenting the cultural and linguistic diversity as displayed by Amitav Ghosh in the first novel of his trilogy entitled *Ibis.* I will focus on the multicultural and multilingual “hybrid space” of communication, as Homi Bhabha named it, and on the way the language mix embedded in the narrative turns the reader into a multicultural researcher and establish the author as a significant representative of the category of “hybrid writers” (Bhabha 55).

Amitav Ghosh is an Indian writer whose work reflects a postcolonial consciousness. His writing has been informed by his early childhood memories heard from his Calcuttan parents who lived during the end of the colonial rule and during Ghandhi´s nonviolent movement towards independence. His fiction highlights colonial and postcolonial issues of identity, rootlessness and multiculturality. The *Ibis* trilogy is an intertextual saga where different characters, of different social background, of different ethnic origin end up in a medley setting and as a motley crew on a slave ship. Of the three, two novels appeared so far: *The Sea of Poppies* and *The River of Smoke*.

In the *Sea of Poppies* the reader is carried back in time in the South Indian opium trade period, where, after advancing on the social scale, all characters collide and start to see each other as comrades, forming an unlikely alliance that goes beyond conventional bonds of family and nation. The triple intertextual narrative begins with the story of Deeti, a young widow of an opium dealer from a village from northern Bihar, who is saved from her husband´s funeral pyre by Kalua, an oversized low-caste who falls in love with her. The second tale is that of Paulette, an orphaned daughter of a French botanist, who arrives on board the ship in order to delete her controversial past and meets Jodu, the son of her nurse, the only link to her past. The other story is that of a bankrupt *raja*, who is chased from his estates which fall into the hands of a gluttonous opium dealer.

Destiny brings these characters and many others together together on *Ibis*, an old slaving ship which sails across the Indian Ocean, towards the Mauritius (“Mareech”) Islands. This vessel is portrayed by Ghosh as a metaphor for a huge womb where the characters are socially reborn. While on land, these characters behaved in a different manner, each of them belonging to a certain community, religion or caste and were bound to strict conventions. The new setting, however, gradually blurs the thick borderline between them. Just as the characters from Ondaatje´s *The English Patient* find the new settings, the desert and the Italian villa, as common spaces of communion, so do all the totally disparate protagonists in the *Sea of Poppies* with the schoonerIbis, the mobile setting they willy-nilly land on. Most of those on board are going to the island of Mauritius as indentured labourers, the differences between them as regards caste or culture being dissolved by their predicament. Their only way out of it is to cross their own ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic borders and to communicate to their own good. Deeti, the female protagonist seals their fate from the very outset of the journey when she dooms:”...from now on there are no differences between us, we are *jahaz-bhai[[2]](#footnote-3)* (…) to each other; all of us children of the ship”(Ghosh *Sea* 120).

Even if important reviewers bend on the postmodern aspect of the narrative (see Sreelatha M. *Reconstructing Identities in Amitav Ghosh’s Sea of Poppies: A Postmodernist Perspective and* *Fictionalization of History in Sea of Poppies* by S. K. Singh), I believe the most outstanding aspect of the novel is its multilingualism. What puzzles the unwarned reader is the multilingual and multicultural mix which, in spite of the limits of the period of the events, Ghosh manages to build. William Rycroft, a recent reviewer, argues that the language style of the novel has at the beginning a disorienting effect on the reader similar to the *nadsat* language introduced by A. Burgess in *A Clockwork Orange* which gradually turns into a rich and exciting mix of languages. (Rycroft *Just William’s*). By mixing so many languages and dialects, Ghosh is able to paint the full range of diversity on board with differences in class, caste, nationality or religion indicated by the words, dialect or language used to communicate. From the first pages of the novel, we are bombarded with an abundance of words and terms from East-Asian, Pacific and pidgin languages which apparently turn the text into an unreadable *Finnegan´s Wake*-like narrative. The author himself states in his acknowledgements page that the cultural and linguistic mix from his book owes a lot to the 19th century scholars and many reference books, dictionaries as well as to modern sources. (Ghosh *Sea* 531)

*Sea of Poppies* has its own lexicon, an *addendum* that Ghosh entitled “The Ibis Chrestomathy.” The author uses this lexicon to provide elaborate amplifications of his favorite turns of phrase and to connect those words with the characters that employ them. Of all the sources he mentions, the most important are, in my view, T. Roebuck´s *An English and Hindostanee Naval Dictionary* and *Hobson-Jobson-a Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases* written by Henry Hule and A.C. Burnell. Moreover, he even confessed, in the aftermath of the publication of the novel, how some personal experiences contributed to the usage of such a vast variety of words and phrases from different languages. Here are some instances.

One of first recurring words which puzzle the reader are the words “lascar” and “malum.” We read in the novel that “lascar” is a sailor who “came from places that were far apart and had nothing in common, except the Indian Ocean; among them were Chinese and East Africans, Arabs and Malays, Bengalis and Goans, Tamils and Arakanese” (Ghosh *Sea* 12). Ghosh goes on and clarifies this in his comment published in *Hindustani Times*:

I came to be astonished by the number of Asian sailors who figured on the crew-lists of 19th century sailing vessels. These ‘lascars’ as they were called, came from every part of the Indian Ocean and the more I read about them, the more I was intrigued by their lives. What drew them to the sea? How did they communicate, among themselves and with their officers? One day, in a library I chanced upon an early 19th century dictionary of the ‘Laskari’ language. Leafing through its pages, I began to wonder what it would be like for a new recruit to learn those words, to discover the nautical world — and so was born Jodu, one of the central characters in the novel. (Ghosh *Confessions*)

“Malum, “ Ghosh disambiguates in his article on the language in *Ibis* from 2012, comes from Arabic and it means “mate” (Ghosh *Of Fanas and Forecastes 34*). A recurrent word used by the lascars is “hokum.” According to Roebuck´s dictionary, "hookum" means in Laskari, the lascar language, "command" (Roebuck inGhosh *Of Fanas).* We may infer that the relation between *lascars* and their *malums* was one of subordination, a colonial master-slave relationship, in Hegelian terms.

Then, we encounter a mixture of sea slang and words and phrases of so many different origins, from English Creole to South Asian languages and dialects that almost dizzy the reader. As far as the usage of Laskari language in sailing context is concerned, Ghosh explains:

Laksari (…) was really just a language of command. For the rest, the lascars probably used, amongst themselves, a series of contact languages and pidgins, made up of elements of Swahili, Malay, and Hindusthani. To communicate with officers and white passengers (…) they probably used variants of the Sino-Portuguese-English pidgin that came to be associated with the South China Coast. (Ghosh *Of Fanas and Forcastles* 56)

According to Townson N., “pidgins are simplified languages which are developed in contact situations between people with no common language and are used for restricted, functional purposes”(Townson 93). Similarly, Romaine notes that “pidgins are the simplified languages characterized by a minimal lexicon, little or no morphology, and limited syntax” (Romaine qtd. in Townson, 94). Here is a first sample of this sort: “Serang Ali wife-o hab makee die. Go topside, to hebbin. By’mby, Serang Ali catchi nother piece wife.”(17) Or, in another sample which resembles a pidgin language: “Must too muchi shout: you go barn shoot sister. I on epiece pukka-sahib, no can catch. You take pistol in pocket, if bugger try shangai, shoot in the face” (21).

More than that, the Laskari dialect contained many swear words which appear frequently in the novel. Many of these can be found in Roebuck dictionary without translation though. Ghosh notes that “this is excusable since his dictionary was mainly a technical one” (Ghosh *Of Fanas and Forecastle 60*). In turn, *Hobson-Jobson* includes such words explaining that they are “terms of abuse which we should hesitate to print if their odious meaning were not obscure to the general. If it were known to the Englishmen who sometimes use the words, we believe there are few who would not shrink from such brutality” ( Hule H. and Burnell A. C. in Ghosh *Of Fanas*). Roebuck provides a list of words from Laskari dialect together with their etymology, which proves the eclectic and consequently hybrid nature of this language. Here are some of these words which appear in the novel explained by the author.

“Serang,” the senior most- derived from Malay;

“sukkânî,” (rendered in English as ‘seacunny’) comes from the Arabic for *rudder* (sukkân);

“ishtor,” the word for *steward*, of Arabic origin;

“jamnâ burdu,” *starboard and larboard*, in Laskari;

“fo´c´sle,” coming from the English “fore-castle” – a ship part, a shallow, curved space between the bows;

“Balti,” derived from the Portuguese “balde”, it probably referred originally to ship’s buckets;

“karma,” came from the Portuguese “camara”, itself a derivative of the Latin ‘camera’ (room, vault). In the novel it is used to mean the ship´s cabin.

(Roebuck in Ghosh *The Ibis* *Chrestomathy*)

Another category of words and phrases which seem almost unreadable are those employed by the Europeans who lived and did trade in South –Asia for many decades during the colonial period. Their language variety is a hybrid form of English spiced up with many Hindi, Bengali and Gujarati terms. In the novel, Ghosh does not italicize or explain the words as they appear in the text as do most Indian writers in English, a thing that makes reading quite difficult unless a reference book or dictionary is consulted. More than that, these words are spelled so that the European accent of the speaker is highlighted. Singh, a recent reviewer of Ghosh ‘s work, who is a speaker of both Hindi and Bengali, states in this respect that “ for a reader who knows the words and their meanings, some of these passages require constant interpretation or extrapolation”(Singh *Language*).

One of the protagonists, Paulette , a French merchant´s daughter, speaks such a variety with Mrs Burnham, her *ayah*(au pair) the wife of a shipping merchant, who took care of her in a mansion in Calcutta: “Mrs Burnham: “Where have you been *chupowing*(italics mine) yourself? I’ve been looking everywhere for you”(203). “Chupowing” derives from the Hindi verb “chupna” and it means “to hide”*(*Singh *Language )* Singh also provides a list of words of this kind and their original meaning in Hindi or Bengali. Here are some of them: “Pollock-sawg” (paalak-saag) for a spinach dish, “chitty” and “dawk” (for chithi and daak, or letter and postbox), “dufter” (daftar, office), “hurremzads” (haraamzadas, bastards), “oolter-poolter” ( upside-down) (Singh *Language*). The last one appears in the following : “He turned a ship oolter-poolter in the Spratlys, which is considered a great piece of silliness amongst sailing men”(Ghosh *Sea* 102).

To conclude with, in Sea *of Poppies*, Ghosh creates a unique lexicon of the early 19th-century cultural references where its multicultural dimension is in the limelight. By doing this, he may well be equated with other postcolonial writers such as Salman Rushdie or Derek Walcott, whose lifetime quest has been that of cultural border crossing and multicultural communion. This hybrid mix Ghosh builds in this novel has both an illuminating and a dizzying effect on the readers which turns them into intratextual and intertextual researchers.

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2. Online Hindi-English Dictionary . Hn. *Jahaz-bhai* - Engl. *cabin-boy* see http://hindi-english.org/index.php?input=jahaz-bhai+&trans=Translate&direction=AU [↑](#footnote-ref-3)